

# Fort Davis

## National Historic Site

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 9-12

Student Activity: Legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers

### LESSON: LEGACY OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

DURATION OF ACTIVITY : 1-2 Class Periods

#### MATERIALS

- “Black Recipients of the Medal of Honor” (4 pages)
- “The Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Davis 1867-1885” (3 pages)
- Photo of Buffalo Soldier U.S. Postage Stamp (29¢, 1994)
- Medal of Honor picture

#### BACKGROUND

In 1866, African-American men were recruited into the U.S. Army to help further the mission of Westward Expansion and the settlement of the American West. Until this time, Blacks were not allowed to serve in the Regular Peacetime Army.

The Black troops, later known as Buffalo Soldiers, took great pride in their service. Like their fellow White soldiers, they were often assigned difficult tasks in remote locations. But their jobs were made even more difficult by the added burden of prejudice—both inside and outside of the army.

As one book states about Black soldiers:  
*“In the army...they found an organization that needed their services and that could not afford to discriminate against them in matters of food, housing, clothing, and equipment. However poor these might be, they were the same that the army issued to white troops. The question of equal pay had been settled during the Civil War...The United States Army was one of the most impartial institutions of the day, and it attracted men whose ability and endurance assured their regiments’ survival and a place, however small, for black Americans in the nation’s public life.”*

From The Black Regulars 1866-1898 by William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips



Medal of Honor

African-American soldiers earned an enviable service record, having the highest level of re-enlistments and the lowest rates of desertion in the entire frontier army. Stationed continuously on the western frontier during the years of clashes with American Indians, Black soldiers played a major role in the peaceful settlement and development of the American West. Later, segregated Black units were valued soldiers in the Spanish-American War, the Philippines, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War.

Here is how one White officer in 1888 described and praised Black soldiers' service to their country:

*"...Always in the vanguard of civilization and in contact with the most warlike and savage Indians of the Plains. The officers and men have cheerfully endured many hardships and privations, and in the midst of great dangers steadfastly maintained a most gallant and zealous devotion to duty, and they may well be proud of the record made, and rest assured that the hard work undergone in the accomplishment of such important and valuable service to their country, is well understood and appreciated, and that it cannot fail, sooner or later, to meet with due recognition and reward."*

December 1, 1888, Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson, upon relinquishing command of the all-Black Tenth U.S. Cavalry

Between 1865 and 1899, the U.S. Army awarded the Medal of Honor (the highest award that can be given to a member of the U.S. military) to 14 enlisted men of African-American descent for service in the Indian Wars Campaigns. These soldiers brought honor to their regiments and recognition to their race. The army awarded four Medals of Honor to members of the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts during the same period.

After being discharged from the army, several thousand Black veterans settled in the West. Some of them secured jobs as federal government employees at places such as army posts. Most discharged soldiers, however, took advantage of the army's offer of free transportation to the city where they enlisted. Unlike today's army, technical training for a career outside the military was not generally provided to soldiers; however, it is possible that the discipline of army service impressed employers enough to hire Black military veterans.

Other "due recognition and reward" that Colonel Grierson spoke of in 1888 was not realized for these soldiers until much later. The Buffalo Soldier Monument—brainchild of U.S. Army Four-Star General Colin Powell—is a historic landmark at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Dedicated in 1992, the monument honors the African-American soldiers who served in the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments. On April 22, 1994, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative Buffalo Soldier stamp.

Traditionally, the military has been very conservative. But in the case of the Buffalo Soldiers, the army ended up being a vehicle for significant social change. The army provided a fair opportunity for Black men when there were few opportunities to be found. Black soldiers became symbols for hope that a better life for African Americans could be achieved.

On February 2, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order #9981 ordering an end to segregation in the United States Armed Forces. This order officially ended the long and honorable service of the segregated troops known as the Buffalo Soldiers; however, it was not until the early 1950s that all units were integrated.

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## TEACHING THE LESSON

1. Make a copy of the background materials for this lesson, “Black Recipients of the Medal of Honor,” and “The Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Davis” (both PDF documents) for each student. Pass out, read aloud or silently, and discuss. For more information on Fort Davis, see [www.nps.gov/foda](http://www.nps.gov/foda)
  2. Discuss as a class or in groups, then have students write about the positive results of military service for African- American men in the 19th century, such as:
    - ✓ Same pay and benefits as a white man doing the same job
    - ✓ Pension (after 30 years of service) and a disability benefit
    - ✓ Chance to receive a free education
    - ✓ Opportunity for promotion and advancement within the U.S. Army
    - ✓ Ask students to come up with more positives.
  3. The U.S. Army, at the time of the Buffalo Soldiers in the 19th century, was a segregated army. Have students discuss or research and then write a one-page essay discussing the integration of the U.S. Armed Forces in the late 1940s and speculating about possible reasons why the military stayed segregated for so long.
  5. Use the picture of the 29¢ commemorative Buffalo Soldier postage stamp, issued in 1994. Have students research other U.S. postage stamps commemorating the contributions of African Americans. Or have students create their own original stamp to honor the Buffalo Soldiers.
  6. Women were not allowed to be soldiers in the U.S. Army in the 19th century, but today there are many women—of all ethnic backgrounds—who serve in all branches of the U.S. armed forces. When were women first allowed to join the U.S. military? In what capacity?
  7. Students look at the picture of the Medal of Honor, then research some of the Buffalo Soldiers who received the Medal of Honor in the 19th century and the history of the medal itself. Who were these men? For what action did they receive the medal?
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